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React Fast Design Diary

Weeks 2 - 4: Pre-midterm

In the beginning of our game design, we weren't really sure what type of game we would like to make. Each group member pitched an idea for us to consider; one was a board-game with extensive RPG elements, and another was a card game that was a combination of two other famous card games. The group had a vote and the card game idea won out. At this stage, the aim of the game was to be a combination of two other card games. It would have the structure and playstyle of "Egyptian Rat Screw" while incorporating the idea of special cards from "UNO". We didn't have knowledge on how certain mobile games were successful at this point, so that idea was the best that we had.

As the game called for special cards akin to "UNO", there were numerous ideas passed around on which mechanics should be included. The special cards at this stage were to have instantaneous effects like "UNO" cards did; they would cause an event to happen in which play would stop until that event was finished before continuing as normal. Some of these mechanics included the same special card mechanics in "UNO": a Skip card that skipped the next person's turn and a Reverse card that reversed the order of turns. Some mechanics had to be adjusted to fit with the play of "Egyptian Rat Screw". For example, the Wild card had everybody slap the pile immediately instead of the player getting a choice on which card the next player had to use. Some mechanics were unique to our game, including an All Add X card where each player had

to add X cards from the bottom of their pile to the center pile and the Reset card, which would restart the round but the current cards would remain in the center pile.

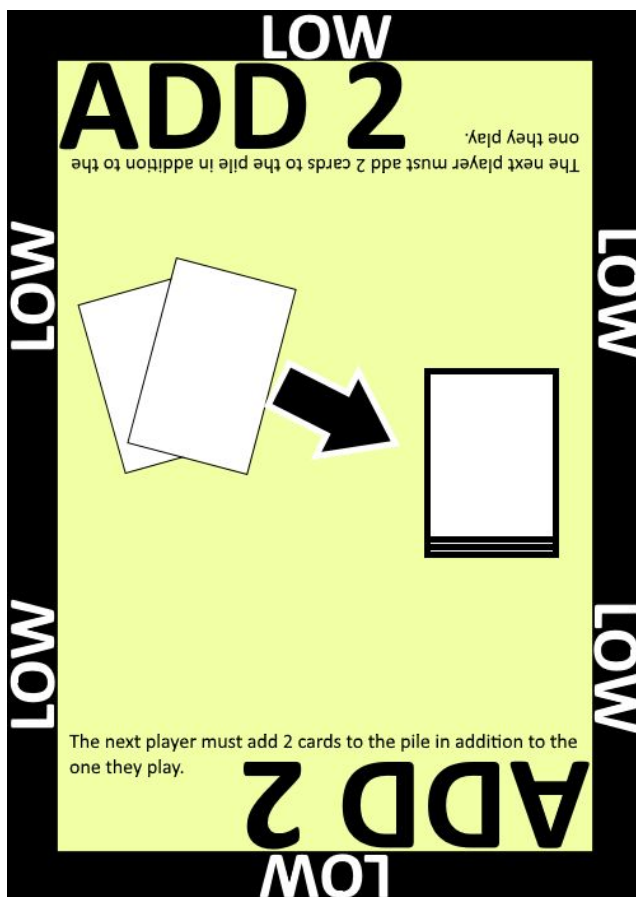
One idea we had for special cards was to have each card introduce a new rule to the game for that round. For example, one card could have allowed the “sandwich rule”, where the players could choose to slap the pile if the card on top matched its number with the card below the previous card (e.g. slap if 3|4|5|4 ← top). While this would create rapid changes to

the game and fits with the theme of rapid reaction time, we voted against it in favor of having cards that allows the player to perform a certain action during their round. The main reason for this was that it would create too much confusion about the rules, as constantly adding new rules and removing them at the end of the round would require the player to think and slow down the game. Another problem would be keeping track of who owned which cards. This would become a problem if players had brought the same special cards.

Initially, our game was planned to be a trading card game, in which players had to acquire their own special cards in order to play the game. We voted on this idea as a way to create more distinction between our game and “Egyptian Rat Screw”. This idea was expanded upon during the third week. We looked to “Magic: the Gathering” and “Hearthstone” as good



models for how we might shape our trading card game. While we used these games as inspiration, one major decision we made was to integrate special cards alongside the standard playing card deck. A consequence of having special cards was that we would have to make many different card effects while also keeping them balanced. Our first method of balancing came from labeling the power of the cards as low, medium, or high. Our rules indicated that each



player would only be able to add a certain amount of cards from each power level so that each player wouldn't seriously outrank another player. An alternative to the balancing we had was that each player could bring in any amount of high-powered cards that they want so that players would feel like their own cards helped them win the game more easily, but balance it by requiring a certain amount of rounds before playing. Another consequence of making a trading card system is figuring out how many cards each player would bring into play. We discussed how if each player would bring in

many cards, then the deck of play would be oversaturated with special cards, which would have slowed down the game as players would need to read the effects of the cards each time they were played. This compounded the previous problem of determining which player had what cards, since the play space would become cluttered with cards. However, if we removed the trading

aspect, it would remove the sense of ownership to arise from a player bringing in multiple cards of their own in order to win, since that would create initial investment in the game. This tradeoff was seriously considered in our design.

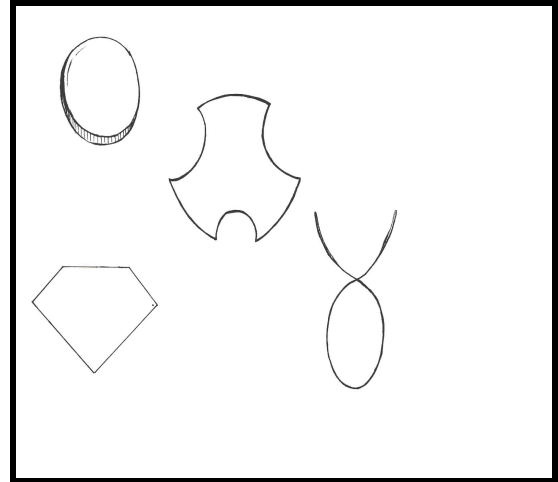
Our initial card design came from the trading card/special card elements of our game. Because we planned for the game to be trading-based, each special card would need to have a description of the effect so everybody could understand it. We ultimately decided to keep the rules brief by making it so that each card could only do one certain thing and player's deck would only contain a limited number of these cards. We also tossed around ideas for a fixed amount of cards for the game, with either a 60-card deck or 90-card deck. While we did not entirely focus on the the card amount at the time, this consideration influenced our decision to make the deck fixed later on.

Weeks 4 - 6: Midterm

Once we got the midterm prompt, our goal for the game became clearer. For example, we had not thought of a theme prior to receiving the midterm prompt, but being required to come up with one, we examined what theme would best work for our game. Someone suggested that the theme be about treasure hunters and thieves due to the nature of “stealing” the cards away when you slap them. After some opinions and justifications were discussed in the group, treasure was the theme that we stuck with. Coming up with new suits was difficult as coins are the most popular image of treasure; we had to consider what would make sense to players regarding suits.

For the visual design of the cards, we temporarily used a casino deck for simple demonstration of the rules of the game, how it would play out, as well as representing our design idea for normal cards, face cards, and special cards. During this time, we all agreed to change the

4 suits—Coin, Gem, Jewelry and Artifact—as the designs for the normal cards and decide upon the special cards later. At this point, our deck would only contain 52 cards without special cards, with the suits replacing of Jewelry for Hearts, Gems for Diamonds, Coins for Clubs, and Artifact for Spade.



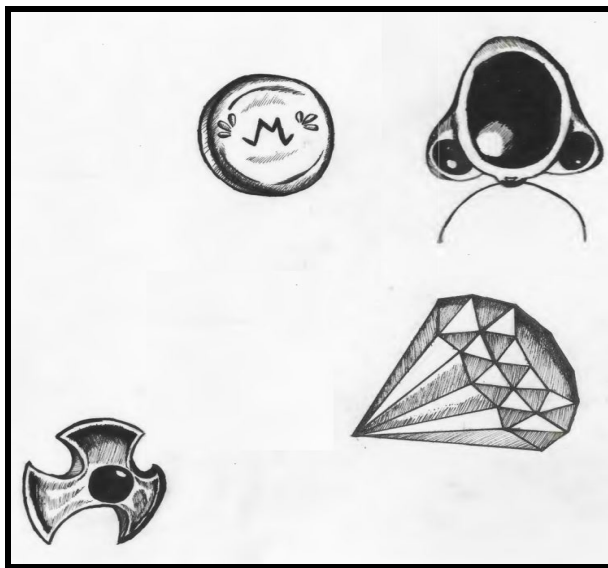
Another part of the midterm prompt that we had to consider was the mechanics. Up until this point, some of the group had never played “Egyptian Rat Screw” before, and since our game is based on that, they had to learn the game from scratch. After they did, however, they got a few new ideas for what the special cards should be. Instead of the instantaneous effects that were initially proposed, each player would get a passive effect from each special card. Not only that, but those cards could be stolen by another player if they managed to slap the pile at the right time. These “traveling cards” were the special cards that we planned to use for our midterm assignment. Another type of special card, “static card”, was also considered. They would have round based mechanics and would be brought in by each of the players (main trading card element). However, this was dropped due to the complexity of interaction between it and the travelling cards.

Weeks 6 - 9: Pre-final

When we got the midterm back, the primary comment we focused on was about not including a discussion of speed games in genre. Initially, we were confused about why speed would be considered a sub-genre of card games. After discussing it within the group and with the professor, we came to realize that speed was an important sub-genre for our game. Looking

through games like “Escape” and “Speed” clarified some points about speed as a mechanic and provided insight into how best to use this mechanic in our game. “Speed” possesses a similar emphasis on speed as React Fast, where playing cards quickly according to the rules was the way to win. “Escape” on the other hand, included the idea of special to use against the other players in the game in addition to having to play normal cards quickly. Another thing we looked at is the reviews for this type of game. Something that prominently stuck out to us were statements that the game felt tedious by the end. We decided that we should make the game’s rules take into account these reviews and make sure that the game ends quickly with less players.

This period is also the second phase of our visual design. Having some sketches of our



ideas ready for the normal cards and face cards, we selected 8 of the best sketches to use.

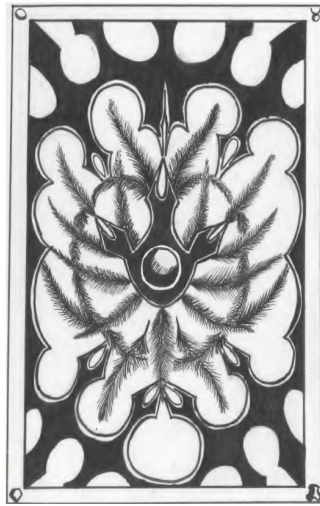
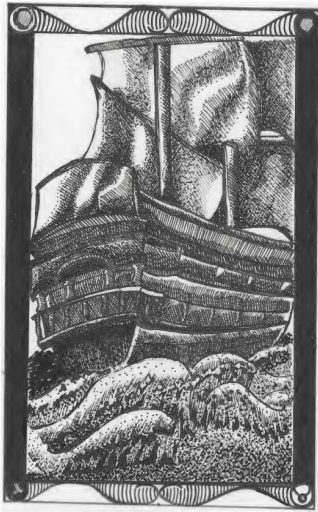
However, without the final decision on the abilities of traveling card, we had to wait for new playtesting sessions in order to have the effects locked in. Some of the sketches didn’t make it to the final decision were for the previously dropped “static” cards.

Between the midterm and the final, we performed some playtesting on the card rules. Because we didn’t own any special-looking cards, we had to improvise and use two decks of the standard 52-card set where one would act like the special cards. Initially, the effects that we had given the cards were difficult to implement into the game because their effects had to be remembered every time they were played. Combine this with the fact that some members of the

group were still becoming familiar with the base game and slow gameplay was inevitable, completely contrary to what we had in mind for the end product. We knew that all games took longer to play the first (few) times that they were played, but we also realized that having many card effects available due to the trading card element would slow down the game every time it was played. Because of this, we remove the trading aspect and made the deck size static.

The decision to remove the trading card element from our game changed a few things for our development. First of all, that meant that we weren't required to make up many new card effects for the game to function. What this allowed us to do was focus on creating and balancing only a small selection of cards, which kept the game manageable in scope. Second, we were now allowed more freedom to include powerful cards. When we had a large deck to make, we had to make sure that each card's power was balanced in range of their power level. Now, we were not as constrained to the power level, since a small group of cards could allow all the cards to be roughly equal to one another. Finally, the question of how many cards would be allowed into the deck that were special cards would be much more easily solved; we decided in the end to include 8 new special cards in addition to the 52 normal cards (60 cards in total).

Just before the final assignment was announced, we decided to start focusing on the visual designs of the cards. We weren't really focused on how the cards would affect the gameplay at this moment, but we still needed the designs to get a working prototype ready. Some decisions that were made include our decision to have multiple objects on the cards to represent higher numbers and making the backs of the special cards would look drastically different from the backs of the normal cards (this is due to the nature of the special cards being separated from the rest of the cards during play).



We also completed two visual designs for the backs of the cards during this phase (left - normal cards, right - traveling card). We sketched and finalized the designs of the traveling cards during these playtesting session. Since one of the mechanics of this game allows a player to steal someone's traveling card by slapping a card that matches their traveling card,

we decided the design of traveling cards to imitate the visual of their matching normal cards.

This idea was significant since it allowed the player to recognize two matching cards of the same type and react faster. For instance, a Gem-traveling card by the rules will be stolen only if another player can slap a card of 6 gems. Hence, the design of gem-traveling cards will have the same visual as a 6-gems normal card. Prior to the playtests, we had our traveling cards' visuals to differentiate from the rest of the deck with highly detail sketches of form, texture, and their types blended in the middle. However, we realized that it would defeat the purpose of the game as it would be too difficult to recognize and would slow down the reaction of the players. The sketches were not made final and discarded.

Weeks 9 - 10: Final

Our design process accelerated once we received our final prompt. First of all, we continued to improve the visual design of the cards. The normal cards were already decided on: put the numbers so it could be read upside down and right side up so it could be read in two directions like most playing cards. We would also put our new card suit designs as pictures onto

the cards and another design onto the back of the cards to have them fit our theme. The face cards (renamed to chance cards for our game) were slightly more difficult to design; we needed a way to show the function of the card while also keeping it simple and within our theme. We decided that we would put a number in the picture that represents a value for a certain rule of the game so there's no confusion.

The most difficult part about our current card design is how to design our special cards. The easiest part of the design of these cards are the back; we decided to use a different design since they need to be separated from the other cards during play. There was a lot of thought put into whether the description of the card would be displayed on the card itself. Because the deck is same every time the game is played, there is no necessity to have it on in order to play the game as the effects could be shown in the rules. However, it would be inconvenient if the rulebook had to be brought out every time a special card was used. Putting the effect description on the cards would solve the problem. On the other hand, putting a description would make those cards' design inconsistent with the design of the other cards. We decided to have the descriptions on the cards in the end to keep gameplay flowing more smoothly.

Besides the design, our playtesting session has found issues in the pacing of the game. At this point, everybody knows the rules of the game well enough to prevent slowdown. Despite this, games still take over 30 minutes to complete, which is well above the goal of around 10 to 15 minutes that we desire. A huge bottleneck of pacing occurs when there are only two people left. Because the game is won through elimination, those who lost early are doomed to watch the rest of the game, and if that takes a long time, it will make our game less desirable. A possible solution to this is to add an actual timer or round limit to prevent play from going on for too

long, but it would defeat the purpose of gathering all of the treasure from your adversaries. We also considered making a new win condition in which you would have to gather one each type of special card (based on suit) which is unlikely unless there are only two players left. This way, there is a simple mechanic that prevents a stalemate from forming. It also adds an element of strategy, since player must always be aware of any special slap cards, since their card can be “stolen” from them by their opponent just before they are about to win.

Another issue of our game is that of balance. At this point, the current rules for the special cards are inconsistent in power and reliability. Most of our cards are relatively low power except for one card which is very powerful. This card is the one that allows the player to replace any card they play with any chance card of their choosing. However, the most effective choice overall was to always choose the chance card to have one chance. There didn’t seem to be a purpose in allowing players to choose the other three chance cards, because they would give other players more chances to play chance cards, and reduce the chance that the special card player wins the pile. The other three special card effects are not nearly as powerful as this effect, and therefore not as satisfying or fun to play. From the advice of the professor and examining the gameplay design decisions of Magic: the Gathering again, we learned that the direction we should take for this is to first make sure the effects of every special card is fun and satisfying to play. Once we achieved this, then we could try to balance their effects if it was necessary.

There is also a problem with deciding how the special cards should stay on the field before, during, and after use. How these rules are applied will affect the power of the special cards. We are also debating on whether to allow players to play multiple special cards in one turn

or to only allow one per turn. Combine all of this with us trying to determine the best effects for the special cards and we run into a lot of problems.

The most important problem to address before demoing our game was getting down the rules on paper and playing with them without discussing any new changes to the game. The main reason for this is that we want to simulate how the actual game is meant to be played by others. While we can easily change game rules on the spot if problems arise, players will not have the same luxury and will have to either stop the game or continue on in confusion. Another element we worried about is the time left to complete the basic structure of the game. While we have a set foundation for how our game is meant to be played, we still don't feel that we have fleshed out and polished the special cards enough. With constant tweaking of rules and balancing cards amongst each other, we really have not played a round without requiring some change during gameplay. However, this has allowed us to go down to the core of what experience our game is designed for. Each iteration has pushed us ever closer to developing a game that requires quick reactions and constant thought.

One thing that we noticed during play was that the traveling cards caused a lot of edge-case scenarios to occur that we didn't take into account. Each time it happened, we had to stop the game and make sure that everyone was clear on what would be done in that situation. Sometimes, the edge-case scenario would open our eyes on how some of the traveling cards interacted with the rest of the game, and we had to consider if we wanted those situations to remain in the game when it was finished. In the end, we didn't outright change any traveling cards for this reason, but it was important to consider these situations while testing the game. The

game might become confusion in these specific situations even with the card's rules printed on them, and we feared that we didn't covered every one of these situations in our rules.

The aspect of the game that we feel we handled well is the pacing. We kept adjusting the alternate win condition until we decided that a player has to get one of each suit of the traveling cards and use them in order to win. This win condition has helped cut down on the time that it would take for two players to finish a long-lasting game without interfering too much with the game when there are a lot of players left. Currently, each game can take between 5 minutes and 25 minutes because of our current win conditions. It is debatable whether the large range of time per game is good, but we feel that nobody is bored for too long after they are eliminated, so our goals of properly pacing the game were achieved.

Playtesting took up most of the rest of our time before our design had to be finished. We kept changing how the traveling cards worked during play to make sure that the previously stated issues would be resolved to the best of the group's abilities. Playtesting our game was rough at times because we didn't have the card designs ready at that time. Because of this, we had to use regular playing cards, and since our traveling cards were supposed to have the effects written down on them, this slowed down play greatly and interfered with us testing the pace of the game.

Unfortunately, we spent most of our remaining time balancing the game, so we didn't have time to playtest the game with others. Because all of us are already familiar with the rules whenever we play, we aren't sure how novice players would react to playing the game for the first time. To make up for this, we plan to print out a set of rules that will tell players about all of the traveling cards and their nuances in special situations. Hopefully the presentation of the game won't be off putting and the game will be fun for those willing to deal with the learning curve.